DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 941 CS 501 041

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TITLE The Selection of Female Opinion Leaders: 30 Years After Decatur.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Newport Beach, California, November, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Females; Higher Education; Human Relations; Interpersonal Relationship; *Leadership Styles; *Media Research; *Public Opinion; Social Change
IDENTIFIERS *Decatur Study

ABSTRACT

Since opinion leadership has been found to be a major factor in interpersonal influence, the ratio between males and females selected as opinion leaders provides a strong indication of the comparative value placed on male and female opinions in a society. The results of the series of studies reported indicate that major changes in opinion leadership patterns have occurred in the 30 years since the classic Decatur study. On most topics, males show no significant preference for one sex over the other in opinion leader selection, but females show a distinct preference for other females. Opinion leadership on political topics was found to be a major exception to this pattern. (Author)

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ED103941

The Selection of Female Opinion Leaders: 30 Years After Decatur

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Abstract

Since opinion leadership has been found to be a major factor in interpersonal influence, the ratio between males and females selected as opinion leaders provides a strong indication of the comparative value placed on male and female opinions in a society. The results of the series of studies reported indicate major changes in opinion leadership patterns have occurred in 30 years since the classic Decatur study. On most topics males show no significant preference for one sex over the other in opinion leader selection, but females show a distinct preference for other females. Opinion leadership on political topics was found to be a major exception to this pattern.

Paper presented at
the Annual Convention of the Western Speech Communication Association
Newport Beach, California
November, 1974

(Competitively Selected Paper, Behavioral Sciences Interest Group)

CS 501 041

The Selection of Female Opinion Leaders: 30 Years After Decatur

by

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"You've come a long way baby." This popular slogan employed by the makers of Virginia Slims cigarettes, suggest. a significant advance in the liberation of women in today's society. There is little question but that women are more liberated today than they were a few decades ago. Many women can remember the days when they were not allowed to vote, smoke, or even give an opinion without severe criticism from the opposite sex, or worse yet, from their own sex. No one now questions the right of women to vote, nor the choice of smoking in public.

These obvious advances, however, are inadequate indices of true progress. A better indication of progress would be evidence that female opinions are now accepted, or even sought on significant issues, by members of both sexes in today's society. Considerable research over the past three decades indicates that most changes in society are produced through interpersonal communication, and the crucial variable in that communication process is the opinion leader, the individual a person turns to for advice or information on a particular topic. If most of the opinion leaders in a society are men, it would be hard to argue that women in that society are liberated. However, if there is a relative balance of males and females serving as opinion leaders, this would be an indication of a relative balance of influence in the society, and it also would be an indication that a measure of true liberation has been achieved.

The Movement for Women's Rights

In as early as 1872 a woman tried to convince American society that women have opinions and should have the right to vote as they please, even in a male dominated society (8). Victoria C. Woodhull fought to eliminate the oppression of women and let women's opinions be heard and known. Woodhull tried to raise awareness that women possess opinions on topics of the day, such as birth control and equal jobs. She wanted men and women alike to realize that women did not have to be so dominated by men and the informal rules of society. Woodhull felt women should be able to speak out and share their opinions about topics of the day (8).

The fight for the right for women's opinions to be heard and respected has continued through the era of Elizabeth Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady on to today. At least until the past few years, women have been looked upon as unimportant when it came to topics such as politics, birth control, marriage, abortion, and sports. A new trend has definitely taken form in the past few years.

Recently we have seen the birth of magazines such as Ms., Viva, and Playgirl designed as vehicles for the expression of women's views. A substantial number of activist women's organizations have been formed. Politicians have given verbal support to women's rights and the need for women in significant governmental positions. In short, there are reasons to believe that women's opinions are finding more opportunities for expression than were available just a few years ago. Not all indicators point in this direction, however. The picture in the electronic media is less than encouraging. Mills (5) reports that while 40 percent of the national work force are women, only 22 percent of the employees of

commercial television stations are women, the overwhelming majority of whom are in clerical positions. The situation in radio is similarly discouraging.

The importance of the male domination of the media is reflected in results of research reported by Turow (9). Turow found that, in evening television dramas in the United States, men are shown predominately in advising and ordering positions. In 70 percent of the episodes men gave the directives and in 30 percent of the episodes women gave the directives. The types of advice given by the men and the women conformed in most cases to the traditional categories for their sex. Twenty-two percent of the directives given by women related to the traditional "masculine" role of evening dramatic programs, while only ten percent of the directives given by men related to areas of traditional feminine knowledge. Turow found, however, that men and women were on a more equal basis in the daytime shows than in the evening shows. This heavy emphasis on the male as the advisor or boss may be a reflection of the American culture. If so, it would appear that we have a long way to go before women's opinions are considered to be as valuable as men's. On the other hand, the observed male emphasis may not be reflective of the culture as a whole, but rather reflect chauvinistic decisions on the part of the male decision-makers in the media.

The Credibility of Women's Opinions

A very important element in opinion leadership is the credibility of the opinion leader. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (3) refer to the opinion leaders as being the people in a community who are turned to for

advice on an issue at hand. These people are seen as having more competence and being more influential than their followers. Rogers and Shoemaker (7) also refer to opinion leaders as having more competence and being more influential than their followers, especially in a modern society. By "influential" these authors mean that the followers are more likely to accept the opinion leader's advice than they are to accept other peoples advice on the same subject. More recently Richmond (6) found that opinion leaders in an educational environment are also viewed by their followers as being more credible than other followers.

Since credibility, particularly competence, is such a significant factor in the selection of opinion leaders, a clue to the role of women as opinion leaders may be inferred from comparisons of men's and women's perceived competence under carefully controlled experimental conditions.

Miller and McReynolds (4) employed a standard message on ABM systems to examine whether or not female communicators were perceived to be as competent as male communicators. As predicted, competence ratings for the male sources were higher than for the females. However, the effect was more pronounced for the female receivers than male receivers (all college students). While male receivers did not rate either the females or males significantly more competent than one another, the female receivers did. They rated the male source significant more competent than the female source. Miller and McReynolds attributed this to the fact that AMB systems is considered to be a man's topic, and that women are still conditioned to their traditional role in society.

This problem of topic bias was confronted directly by Goldberg (1). He employed 1500 word articles in six separate fields, art, history,

dietetics, elementary education, city planning, linguistics, and law. Female college students were presented these articles and asked to evaluate them on the basis of competence. Half of the subjects had female authors' names attached to a given article, the other half had male. Each subject responded to three articles attributed to males and three to females. The results permit us to discount the topic as the cause of the results of the Miller and McReynolds (4) study. Goldberg's results indicated a strong negative bias against women on the part of his female subjects. The male authors were seen as more competent than the female authors, even on the topics of dietetics and elementary education.

The results of these studies suggest that women are perceived as less competent than men, at least by college student women. Whether this perception is characteristic of all segments of American society, of course, cannot be clearly inferred from these studies.

Opinion Leadership of Women

If women are perceived as less competent than men by other women, they may be less likely to be selected as opinion leaders than men. Indeed, in 1945 Katz and Lazarsfeld (2) found that whether women were married, single, or separated, they chose men as their opinion leaders in matters which employed public affairs. They also saw these men as more competent than other females. However, Katz and Lazarsfeld also found that the topic of concern impacted the selection of opinion leaders. They found that when females decided they wanted to attend a movie and needed an expert to consult, females of all ages turned to other females for advice and information on the movies to see.

Similarly, Katz and Lazarsfeld (2) found that fashion influence traveled from young girls to older women. In general, then, Katz and Lazarsfeld's results indicated a major interaction of topic and sex in the selection of opinion leaders. These results suggest that, for women, women may be opinion leaders on "women's topics" and men on "men's topics." While this may appear to provide a "balance" and be perceived as quite desirable, this conclusion would be very misleading. The so-called "men's topics" are ones with considerably more social significance than the ones with female identification.

Since the major thrust of the women's liberation movement has come some time after the collection of the Katz and Lazarsfeld data, it is very possible that major changes in patterns of opinion leader selection have occurred in recent years, particularly among women. The present studies were designed to probe these possible changes and to investigate whether male and female opinion leader preference differ.

Generalized Opinion Leaders

The literature on opinion leadership draws a sharp distinction between general opinion leaders and opinion leaders on specific topics. Consequently, both types of opinion leaders were considered in this series of studies. In all cases the general opinion leader was operationalized as "the person you most often turn to for advice, other than a member of your family." This operationalization specifically excluded both spouses and parents, persons whom Katz and Lazarsfeld (2) found in 1945 in their classic Decatur study were frequently indicated as opinion leaders on politics by females. These potential choices were excluded

because we believed that it might be difficult for our subjects to make a clear distinction between frequency of interaction with another person and choice of that person as an opinion leader. Further, if general opinion leaders are overwhelmingly within the family, as reported by Katz and Lazarsfeld, then general opinion leadership could not have the major impact in the diffusion process that has been observed in numerous later studies (7).

Three subject populations were sampled to investigate possible differences in choice of general opinion leaders based on either the sex of the subject or the sex of the potential opinion leader. The first sample was comprised of 186 unmarried undergraduate students in basic communication courses, 61 male and 125 female. The second sample included 66 female graduate students in education, 38 single and 28 married. The final sample included 272 married teachers, principals, extension agents. members of the Lions and Rotary clubs, and their spouses. The sample included 126 males and 146 females (several of the spouses were not available to complete the instrument, hence the unequal number of males and females). The age range in the sample was from 22 to 65, with approximately equal frequency across the entire range. The subjects not in Lions or Rotary were either enrolled in a graduate teaching methods course or married to an enrollee. Data for each sample were analyzed separately. The data were first examined by means of 2 x 2 chi-squares and phi coefficients to see if the sex of subject (or in the case of the female graduate students, marital status) and sex of opinion leader formed an interactive relationship. In the overall chi-square was found to be significant, simple chi-squares for the classification of sex or marital

status were performed. If the overall chi-square was not found to be significant, simple chi-squares for sex of opinion leader across classifications were performed. The criterion for significance for all tests was set at $p<.05$.

The results indicated that both sex and marital status have a significant impact on choice of general opinion leaders. For both the undergraduate and married adult samples the overall chi-squares indicated the presence of an interaction between sex of subject and sex of chosen general opinion leader (see Table 1). In the married adult sample both the males ($X^2 = 85.94$, $p<.05$) and the females ($X^2 = 31.56$, $p<.05$) overwhelmingly chose general opinion leaders of the same sex. However, among the single undergraduates, only the female choice pattern was the same ($X^2 = .15$, NSD). The preference of female general opinion leaders on the part of females is also indicated by the results of data provided by the female graduate students (see Table 1). The non-significant overall chi-square indicates that marital status did not result in differential general opinion leader choices. However, disregarding marital status, these female subjects preferred female general opinion leaders 2 to 1 ($X^2 = 10.24$, $p<.05$).

Specialized Opinion Leaders

Considerable research has indicated that choice of opinion leaders can be influenced heavily by the specific topic in question (7). For example, with female subjects Katz and Lazarsfeld (2) found that for choice of movies and advice on fashion, females were most frequently chosen as opinion leaders, while on the topic of politics males were the

predominant choice. In short, it would appear that there are "female topics" and "male topics." To determine whether this sex bias is present today with females or males, these same topics were chosen for study, as well as two topics not examined by Katz and Lazarsfeld that were believed to have less or no obvious sex bias. These topics were information about a class in which the subject was enrolled and information about an elective course the subject was considering taking.

Data from four subject populations were collected. The married adult sample and the female graduate student sample discussed above provided their choices of opinion leaders for "the person whose opinion you most often seek concerning movies you might want to attend," "the person whose opinion you most often seek concerning changing clothing styles," and "the person whose opinion you most often seek concerning voting and candidates for political office." A sample of 192 students (74 male, 118 female) enrolled in basic undergraduate communication classes provided their choices of opinion leaders for the person "you would prefer to go to to get notes and other information about the class." A sample of 191 eleventh and twelfth grade students (109 males, 81 females; approximately half of each sex were black, half white) enrolled in required social studies classes also provided their choices for opinion leader for class information. In addition, they provided choices of the person "you would prefer to go to to get information about an elective course you are considering taking." The data were analyzed in the same manner as those for the generalized opinion leader.

The results on the topics presumed not to have an obvious sex bias are reported in Table 2. In each case, the overall chi-square was

significant. Further analysis indicated that this significance was principally the result of the overwhelming preference for female opinion leaders on the part of female subjects. The college females chose female opinion leaders by a ratio of more than 4 to 1 ($X^2 = 46.41$, $p<.05$), the high school females preferred female opinion leaders on the class information topic by a ratio of almost 7 to 1 ($X^2 = 40.11$, $p<.05$), and they preferred females on the elective course topic by a better than 2 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 13.44$, $p<.05$). However, the college males ($X^2 = 1.35$, NSD), the high school males on the class information topic ($X^2 = 3.31$, NSD), and on the elective course topic ($X^2 = 3.64$, NSD) evidenced no significant sexual preference for opinion leaders.

The results on the topics initially employed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (2) yielded several interesting findings. On the movies topic the analysis of the data from the married adult sample resulted in a significant overall chi-square (see Table 3). There appeared to be a slight tendency for both males and females to turn to members of the opposite sex for opinion leadership. However, this tendency was not significant for either the males ($X^2 = 2.96$, NSD) or the females ($X^2 = .51$, NSD) when analyzed separately. The results from the female graduate student sample failed to indicate an effect for marital status on choice of sex of opinion leader. The data collapsed across marital status levels also failed to indicate a significant sexual preference for these female subjects ($X^2 = .58$, NSD).

A very strong preference for female opinion leaders on the topic of fashion was evidenced by both the married adult females and the female graduate students. The analysis of the data from the married adult sample

yielded a significant overall chi-square (see Tble 3). This result was primarily a function of the female subjects' preference of female opinion leaders by an almost 4 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 23.35$, $p<.05$). The males showed no significant sexual preference ($X^2 = 1.33$, NSD). The marital status of the female graduate students produced no significant effect. This sample preferred female opinion leaders by over a 6 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 32.06$, $p<.05$).

A clear preference for male opinion leaders on the topic of politics was evidenced by the subjects in both samples. The analysis of the data from the married adult sample yielded a non-significant overall chi-square (see Table 3). The males by approximately a 3 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 11.86$, $p<.05$) and the females by approximately a 4 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 23.76$, $p<.05$) both chose male opinion leaders on politics. The data from the female graduate students indicated a similar preference by approximately a 6 to 1 ratio ($X^2 = 31.23$, $p<.05$), with marital status having no significant impact.

Discussion

It would appear from the results of these studies that "baby" has come a ways. Whether it is a "long way" is certainly open to question. Our results must be interpreted in the context of the samples studied. Our adult subjects were clearly better educated than adults in general in our society. Considerable research on diffusion and social change (7) suggests that adoption of innovations, in this case acceptance of women's opinions, is frequently earlier among the well-educated. Thus any progress suggested by our data probably should be interpreted as only

an early trend toward change rather than a clear societal pattern.

Although previous research suggests that females judge males to be more competent than other females across a wide variety of topics, this bias was reflected in the present study only on the topic of politics, with a slight, non-significant trend in the same direction on the topic of movies. If we define chauvinism as biased, unreasoned preference for one's own kind (in this case, sex), we might raise the question of the presence in the data from these studies of a significant degree of female chauvinism. We might be able to discount the results for both sexes on general opinion leadership, since members of the subjects' families were excluded. Similarly, one might argue that females really are more competent than males on the subject of fashion, and the reverse on politics, because of educational patterns in our cultural. However, results on the topics related to the educational environment are more difficult to discount. The results on the educational environment topics are even more interesting in light of the absence of a comparable pattern for males. An alternative, and equally credible, interpretation of these results is that our female subjects often selected female opinion leaders because of a hesitancy to initiate interaction with males. This pattern was more pronounced with our older, married subjects. If we accept the results of the research by Goldberg (1) as indicating that females see males as more competent than other females on most topics, our results may simply reflect a preference for opinion leaders who are more similar to one's self on the competence dimension, a finding consistent with considerable research in the area of diffusion of innovations (7).

While the question of female chauvinism is raised but not answered

by our results, an encouraging picture is presented concerning male chauvinism. Although, males did not show a significant preference for female opinion leaders on any topic, they also showed little evidence of a preference for males. In general, there were few significant differences attributable to opinion leader sex for male subjects. Married males showed a significant preference for male general opinion leaders and opinion leaders or politics. As noted above, the general opinion leader results might be discounted because of the exclusion of the potential for choosing the spouse. Most important is the fact that the single males did not use sex as a basis for determining either general opinion leaders or opinion leaders on specific topics in the educational environment.

As a whole, examination of the results of these studies provides an encouraging picture for the acceptance of women's views in contemporary American society. The immediate rejection of women's opinions may be becoming a thing of the past. The problem of "male topics" and "female topics" may have declined over the past 30 years. The results of the current series of studies indicate that neither movies nor fashion are strictly women's topics any longer. Of course, the topic of politics produced discouraging results. As was the case 30 years ago, both males and females indicated an overwhelming preference for male opinion leaders in politics. Probably the most encouraging sign is the fact that the single males studied were about as likely to turn to females as to males for general opinion leadership. These results in combination with those on the topics related to politics and the educational environment suggest that while true equality of men's and women's opinions has not yet been

achieved in the minds of either men or women, some real progress may have been made in overcoming the destructive male chauvinism of the past, particularly among younger males.

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Table 1

Selection of General Opinion Leaders

	Sample					
	Single Undergraduates		Female Graduates		Married Adults	
Subject Classification	Male	Female	Married	Single	Male	Female
Sex of Opinion Leader: Male	32	45	8	14	115	25
Female	23	80	20	24	11	121
Overall Chi-square	4.58*		.50		148.86*	
Phi	.16*		.09		.74*	

* Significant

Table 2

Selection of Specialized Opinion Leaders in Education Environment

	Sample-Topic					
	College Class Information		High School Class Information		High School Elective Course	
Subject Classification	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sex of Opinion Leader:						
Male	42	22	64	12	65	24
Female	32	96	45	69	45	57
Overall Chi-square	29.73*		37.32*		16.27*	
Phi	.39*		.44*		.29*	

* Significant

Table 3

Selection of Specialized Opinion Leaders:
Katz and Lazarsfeld Topics

		Married Adult Sample Topic					
		Movies		Fashion		Politics	
Subject Classification		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sex of Opinion Leader:	Male	44	76	52	31	83	115
	Female	70	64	70	113	31	30
Overall Chi-square		6.21*		13.69*		1.50	
Phi		.16*		.23*		.08	

		Female Graduate Student Sample Topic					
		Movies		Fashion		Politics	
Subject Classification		Married	Single	Married	Single	Married	Single
Sex of Opinion Leader:	Male	16	18	7	3	22	31
	Female	10	13	21	35	4	5
Overall Chi-square		.60		3.67		.03	
Phi		.10		.24		.02	

* Significant